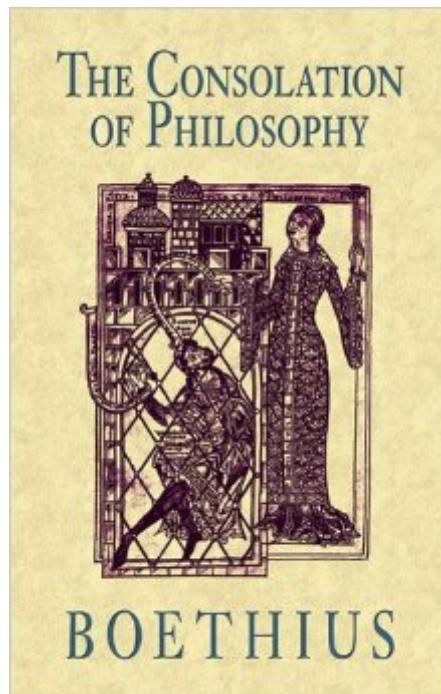


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# The Consolation Of Philosophy



## Synopsis

One of the most influential books in the history of Western thought, *The Consolation of Philosophy* was written in a prison cell by a condemned man. Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480–524) was a Roman scholar, theologian, philosopher, and statesman. Imprisoned by the Ostrogothic king Theodoric, probably on trumped-up subversion charges, he was thrown into a remote prison where he was eventually executed. While awaiting his fate, he wrote this dialogue in alternating prose and poetry between himself and his spiritual guardian. Its subject is human happiness and the possibility of achieving it in the midst of the suffering and disappointment that characterize human existence. As Richard H. Green notes in the introduction, "For the reader of the Christian Middle Ages, *The Consolation of Philosophy* celebrated the life of the mind, or reason, and the possibility of its ultimate victory over the misfortunes and frustrations which attend fallen man's pursuit of transitory substitutes for the Supreme Good which alone can satisfy human desires." Mr. Green's translation is quite literal in order to remain as faithful as possible to Boethius's original meaning. He has also provided an informative introduction and notes. The result is a superbly accessible edition that still exercises a powerful influence on contemporary thinkers and theologians and represents a source of comfort and solace for the general reader.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I didn't know exactly what to expect when I first picked up a modern-English translation of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*. I knew that Boethius was held to be one of the greatest thinkers of his time--a child prodigy from a distinguished Roman family, a

distinguished student of Greek, who essayed to translate all of Plato and Aristotle into Latin, and reconcile their philosophies (a task which he never completed). I knew that *The Consolation* was held to be one of the most influential books of the middle-ages: translated into English by Geoffrey Chaucer and no less than two English monarchs. I didn't expect the fusion of allegorical tale, platonic dialogue, and lyrical poetry (the genre is officially called the Menippean Satire) that I found. The issues *The Consolation of Philosophy* addresses were already the time-worn province of philosophical thought by the time that Boethius essayed to address them: the nature of predestination and free will, why evil men often prosper and good men (as Boethius thought himself) often fall into ruin, the nature of the relationship between time and eternity. And the answers are mostly not new with him either: long chains of sophistical reasonings that prove, among other things, that evil men do not wholly exist, and that by allowing them to obtain their evil desires, God is punishing them more terribly than if he had stopped them. The answers are familiar, in tone, if not in exact content: a mystic-based neoplatonic vision of God as an eternal oneness, to which the soul rises through the layers of being. A somewhat recursively defined and unworldly 'good,' to which all souls aspire. Long passages on the vanity of worldly gain, the fickleness of fortune--all of them are familiar to readers who've read much classical or medieval philosophy. But much of what feels familiar in *Consolations of Philosophy* is not familiar from its sources, but from the many works for which it is the basis. It is in Boethius that much of the thought of the the Classical period was made available to the Western Medieval world. Thus, you find things in *The Consolation* that echo throughout the Western Canon--the female figure of wisdom that informs Dante, the ascent through the layered universe that is shared with Milton, to say nothing of the ideas of the reconciliation of opposing forces that find their way into Chaucer in *The Knight's Tale*, among others. But beyond the influence of the ideas, what *The Consolation of Philosophy* has that is lacking in most other philosophical texts is a feeling of the importance of these ideas: Boethius wrote this book while awaiting trial and execution (he was ground to death in a mortar) on charges of treason, and though the book isn't explicitly autobiographical, the problems that it deals with were of the utmost importance to him at the the time, and he didn't have time to spare on superfluities. What results, then, is a philosophy made explicitly to deal with suffering: compact and full of emotion. Whether you read this book as a key to Medieval thinkers, an introduction to Classical thought, or simply as a way of looking at the problems that still concern us to this day, you should, by all means, read it.

The particular edition I am reviewing is the Oxford World's Classics translation by P. G. Walsh. This is one of those classics that can catch an unsuspecting reader completely by surprise, especially if

one has read many other works by near contemporaries. The circumstances under which it was composed are legendary, and lend the work a legitimacy granted to few other works. Boethius was among the foremost government officials in what was essentially the successor government to the end of the Roman Empire. Rome and much of the rest of what would later become Italy was under the control of the Ostrogoth king Theodoric. A product of one of the leading Roman families, Boethius ascended to a power of great honor and authority under Theodoric, only to be accused of treason late in the latter's life, at which point Boethius was imprisoned and condemned to death. While awaiting his fate (including whether Theodoric actually intended on carrying out the sentence), Boethius wrote this remarkable dialog between a prisoner whose situation closely resembles Boethius' and Philosophy personified as a woman. Although many topics are discussed, the heart of the dialog is the nature of true happiness. Although few of its readers are likely to face circumstances as dire as Boethius', the work remains remarkably pertinent in an age where ideals of happiness are dictated almost entirely by our modern consumer society. Philosophy carefully explains to the prisoner that that happiness can never be found in such things as fame or power or riches and other things that are confused with the true source of happiness. For Boethius' Philosophy, happiness is ultimately rooted in the Christian God, but even for non-Christians, the lightly theological tone of the work provides much reflection on the nature of happiness in almost any kind of situation. The Walsh edition of this work is, in my opinion, the finest readily available edition in English. The notes are marvelous, both providing overviews to each upcoming section as well as providing detailed comments on specific lines in the text. The introduction gives any new reader of the work all the context and background that he or she would need to digest the work. Best of all, the translation is exceptionally readable, and the translations of the many poems far above the average for most academic translations of verse. I recommend this work strongly to either of two kinds of readers. First, for anyone who is a student of intellectual history the work remains for an understanding of a host of writers in the middle ages, as well as for many 19th century poets. Second, anyone interested in devotional or reflectional works, whether religious or philosophical, this remains one of the most essential works in the history of thought. By almost any standard, this is a work that demands careful reading and study.

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